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SUBJECT: REVIEWING YEMEN'S PREVIOUS EXTREMIST
REHABILITATION PROGRAM AND EXAMINING ITS PLANS FOR A NEW ONE

REF: SANAA 168

Classified By: Ambassador Stephen A. Seche for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

¶1. (U) From 2002 through 2005, Yemen conducted an extremist rehabilitation program that is believed to have had some success. This report outlines what is known about that program and how it worked, and compares what is known about the ROYG's current plans for a rehabilitation center to it. While recent movement on the rehabilitation center is welcome, there is still a long way to go before Yemen is ready to accept the return of its GTMO detainees. End Summary.

The Old Program

¶2. (C) In 2002, Judge Hamoud al-Hitar undertook a program to reform extremists through dialog. The program was simple and relied primarily on conducting a dialog with imprisoned extremists to convince them that terrorism and violence were not consistent with the teachings of Islam. 420 individuals passed through the program many of whom were returnees from foreign jihad, including some returning from Afghanistan. Initial startup costs were negligible. The dialogs were held in an empty room at the prison and the prisoners were housed with the rest of the prison population. The primary expense was providing the participants pencils, paper, and research materials to support their participation. The participants were given ample time to research and establish their positions and then would sit with Hitar, who would discuss their positions and present his point of view. This process would be repeated as needed until the participant was convinced to disavow terrorism.

¶3. (C) Hitar emphasized to POL/E Chief on February 4 that the key to the program was not necessarily the content of the dialog but how it was conducted. "It is important to respect the ethics of the dialog," he said. "Each side should be given adequate time and the humanity of the participants must be respected." He added that each case was different and each participant had different needs. "You have to be like a doctor," he said, "except a doctor diagnoses the body and you must diagnose the thinking."

¶4. (C) As an example, Hitar offered the story of one young extremist. When Hitar first met with him the young man refused to "Salaam" him. (Note: Hitar explained to POL/E Chief that exchanging the traditional greeting "Salaam Alaikum" means more than simply saying hello. It also constitutes a promise not to attack. Therefore, a refusal to exchange the greeting can be seen as tantamount to a threat. End Note.) Hitar commenced the dialog by asking the young man about himself. After ascertaining that the man had been

married shortly before his arrest, he asked if the man had been afforded the chance to be with his wife. When the man said he had not, Hitar summoned the warden and asked if the prison had a place where prisoners could visit with their wives. The warden said there was no such place and Hitar directed him to find a place for the young man to be with his wife even if that place was the warden's office.

¶15. (C) Hitar then asked the young man if he had been given access to the books he needed to prepare his arguments. The young man answered no and Hitar asked him to list the books he needed. Then Hitar summoned the warden again and directed him to provide the young man with the books on the list. The warden replied that some of the books were banned and Hitar responded that books may be banned outside of the dialog but no books were banned within the dialog. Having secured for the young man the right to see his new wife and access to the books he requested, Hitar did not return to see him for four months. After four months when Hitar entered the dialog room the young man not only greeted him, but the two embraced and cried together. By respecting the man's human needs and showing him compassion, Hitar asserted that he had broken down the wall of his resistance.

¶16. (C) Hitar added that the program was designed to continue after the extremists were returned to society. As conceived, someone would visit the participant at regular intervals to a) ensure that he had not returned to extremism and b) to help him cope with the pressures of reintegration. If the participant did not have a trade, Hitar specified that he should be given training. If he needed money to set up a business, he should be given financial assistance. Hitar, however, put primary importance on the counseling aspect of the follow-on program. If the participant said he was having trouble getting along with his boss at work the visitor should offer to go to his work site and help mediate. If the participant was found to be having marital problems, the visitor should offer to help him reconcile with his partner. (Note: Post has no information as to whether or not the follow-on program, as Hitar envisioned it, was ever carried out, and does not believe that Hitar himself performed any follow-on visits. End Note.)

¶17. (C) With Hitar's appointment as Minister of Awqaf and Religious Guidance in 2005, he no longer had time to implement the dialog program. It was passed to individuals he had trained to take over. These replacements do not appear to have had the same success Hitar is believed to have had and the program has been essentially moribund since 2005. Hitar claims substantial success for the program, asserting to POL/E Chief that no more than 5 percent of participants have returned to extremism. Hitar blamed these recidivists on a failure of the ROYG to provide adequate post-release counseling (as described in para 6).

The New Program

¶18. (C/NF) After months of foot-dragging, the ROYG now appears to be taking steps toward implementing an extremist rehabilitation that would enable the USG to return Guantanamo detainees. After his December resignation, Former Deputy Prime Minister Rashad al-Alimi has been tasked by the ROYG to oversee construction of the rehabilitation center. Documents provided to the Ambassador by Alimi on January 31 (reftel) indicate that the ROYG has taken into account at least some of the lessons learned by Hitar about respecting the humanity of the extremists and reintegrating them into society. Provision is made for housing that would allow detainees to live, at least on a temporary basis, with their wives and children. Provision has also been made for vocational training for detainees to prepare them for reintegration into society. These documents, however, focus entirely on infrastructure and construction costs and shed little light on the proposed program itself.

¶19. (C) A separate document prepared by the Sheba Center for Strategic Studies (SCSS) in April 2008 provides some

additional general information about the program. It specifies the formation of four subcommittees to take care of various phases of the operation. The largest of the four, the religious subcommittee, will be responsible for the dialog portion of the program. The psychological and social subcommittee would be responsible for evaluating the participants' social condition, diagnosing any psychological problems, and assessing the participant's compliance with the process and the needs of his family. The security subcommittee would evaluate the security risk posed by the participants, make release recommendations and be responsible for post-release monitoring. The media committee would be responsible for preparing educational materials for the program and conducting outreach to young people outside of the program.

¶10. (C) The SCSS plan seems to fall short of Hitar's vision in two significant ways. It does not specify that participants are to be provided with whatever research material they need to formulate their positions. In Hitar's view, a lack of these resources would reduce the credibility of the dialog. While the SCSS plan specifies how the ROYG should reintegrate the detainees into society, it does not require continued discussions between those who have completed the program and their mentors. This would appear to leave the program vulnerable to exactly the point of failure the Hitar noted for the old program. When asked, Hitar said that he had not been contacted about helping prepare the dialog portion of the new program.

Comment

¶11. (C/NF) In spite of President Saleh's optimism that the rehabilitation program can be put in place in a short time, there is still a very long way to go. (Note: In a recent speech Saleh asserted that the GTMO detainees would be returned to Yemen within three months. End Note.) Leaving Hitar, the Yemeni with the most experience in this area, out of the loop, either by omission or by design, seems to be a failure in judgment on the part of the ROYG. While Alimi appears to have reinvigorated the process of constructing the facility, there is simply no evidence of serious efforts to lay out a solid rehabilitation and re-orientation program, including post-release monitoring. The absence of these program elements, coupled with the ROYG's poor track record when it comes to keeping extremists in custody, fails to inspire confidence. The day when Yemen can receive its GTMO detainees and place them in a secure, credible program, seems a long way off. End Comment.

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